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Editorial: Health and educational psychology – the interface

The year 2011 has marked the silver jubilee of health psychology in Britain. It was in December 1986 that the Health Psychology Section of the British Psychological Society was incorporated, eventually becoming the Division of Health Psychology, with its own standards for training and professional qualifications in this discipline. Its founding chair was Marie Johnston, now Professor of Health Psychology at the University of Aberdeen, and a seminal figure in the development of health psychology internationally. The occasion was celebrated in a special feature in the December issue of *The Psychologist*, and it is also marked in this special issue of *Educational and Child Psychology* on the interface of health and educational psychology.

The World Health Organisation has defined health as ‘a complete state of physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity’ (World Health Organisation, 1948, p. 100). The issue is clearly therefore of interest to educational psychology. In calling for papers for this issue, we suggested contributors might address some of the key topics in current health psychology research, policy and practice, such as smoking, children’s involvement in physical exercise, healthy eating habits, sexual health or substance abuse. We also solicited work that might explore the potential role for educational psychologists in relation to these topics through, for example, training, research or systemic interventions with schools.

We have been, therefore, somewhat surprised by the range of topics that were (and were not) addressed by the submissions we received. As may be seen in the published papers three address matters relating to food. Of these one addresses

‘healthy choices’; the other two are concerned with obesity in childhood. Two other papers are related to physical activity – and of these, one is also concerned with obesity.

There is, clearly, international concern about the increasing weight of the population in both ‘developed’ and ‘developing’ nations. In England, for instance, current data suggests that 32% of children aged 11-15 are ‘overweight or obese’ (British Heart Foundation, 2011). Further, this is not an issue that is restricted to childhood. The medical sequelae of childhood obesity include increased likelihood of obesity in adulthood and the development at relatively younger ages of non-communicable diseases such as diabetes and cardiovascular disease (de Saumarez & Dunsmuir, this issue; World Health Organisation, 2011). A necessary starting point in attempting to counter this problem may be, as both de Saumarez and Dunsmuir, and Mansfield and Doutre note here, in gaining greater understanding of children’s views on their weight and influences on their eating behaviour. Conner, Hugh-Jones and Berg provide great help with their detailed study of the influences on adolescents’ *intentions* with respect to choices they could make in their eating habits.

Taking a different approach to addressing obesity, Karen Stockton provides some illustration of what may foster or inhibit adolescents’ engagement in physical activity. Likewise, but without direct reference to childhood obesity, Lamb and Gulliford provide an evaluation of the effects of physical exercise on children’s emotional and behavioural well-being.

Taken as some sort of sample of the interests and motivation of applied psychologists, the papers offered here, therefore, may provide some indication of where there are concerns. However, we are struck by and wish to comment on, the apparent lack of attention to issues such as sexual health and the effects of drug and

alcohol abuse, all of which are also significant factors in the lives of a considerable proportion of young people (National Health Service, 2007; World Health Organisation, 2004a, 2004b). This highlights the issue raised by MacKay in the introductory paper on health psychology interventions in educational psychology, which he views as essentially a 'greenfield site', and sets out an agenda for health initiatives in educational psychology services.

We would hope that the examples of the important work published here will encourage others to investigate ways that psychologists can make a difference to the way young people deal with other influences on their health and well-being.

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